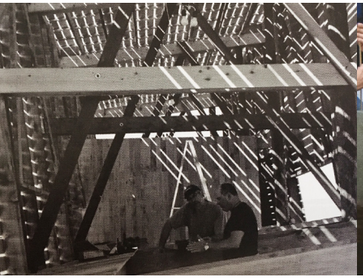
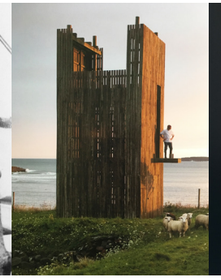
Ghosts in the Machine

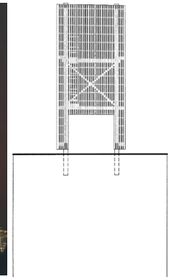
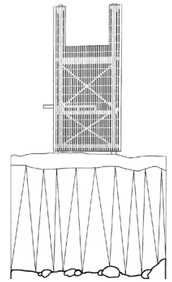
BOOK REVIEW

Ghosts In The Machine





There are some debates in architecture that seem to go endlessly around the houses. One of these is between the profession and the relevance of architecture schools. It goes something like this.

A series of seasoned practioners gather to lament the poor standards of recent graduates: their inability to come to terms with ‘the real world’; their inability to manipulate the latest BIM software; and their inability to have the ken to produce the details that were required on site yesterday. Sometimes there are substantially sized elephants in the room wearing t-shirts with the words ‘low fees’, ‘long hours’ and ‘value engineering’ on them. They (the elephants) seem to grow larger and angrier amidst the shrinking proportions of public space, and more tortured under the litigious and conflictual mechanisms deployed by the ‘zoo keepers’ of our built environment.

In the same room (but usually not sitting together) is another group, equally seasoned but academic, and who are fighting off this ‘commercial assault’ with cries of ‘independent learning’, ‘resistance to commodification’, and shouts of ‘where is the social agenda?’. They continually overstate that there is more to an architectural education than practice. This is followed by the slow fuse insult, that the practioners gathered, might not be the best representatives of the new, exciting, dynamic, social media driven youth, who are grasping the architectural mantle with both hands on their iPhone.

All parties agree to continually disagree, until the debate is put aside to resurface at some other consultation or validation event.

How often have I sat amidst this debate, and wondered if there was another way to avoid having to watch the competing dualities of ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ chasing each other around the arena of the professionals versus the pedagogues? Is it possible to get beyond the immediate demands and pressures of practice, or to escape the inevitable disconnect of academic idealism?

The current educational review in architecture has predictably raised once again what were the traditional origins of the profession such as dedicated apprenticeships and part-time study, in an effort to reduce what is perhaps the biggest elephant in the room: the shocking liabilities of student debt that is accumulated in becoming an architect.

The Work of MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects: Economy as Ethic by Robert McCarter may not seem, at first glance, to be the place to turn for some resolve, but this would be to misjudge a book that may offer some useful insights.

Like any other expensively produced monograph it adopts the conventional publishers approach: a series of reflective essays followed by a chronological catalogue of work beautifully photographed and collated with drawings and short descriptions. There seems, initially, little in the way to suggest there may be something else on offer, until we recognize that two of the writers are Juhani Pallasmaa and Kenneth Frampton. Neither are given to extending the mindless and seemingly limitless blurb of promotional nonsense that swells the page count of most architecture books. The reason both are writing here is connected directly to their experience at the Ghost Construction Laboratories founded by Brian Mackay-Lyons at his farm at Shobac, Kingsburg, Nova Scotia. But more of this later.

I met the wonderfully named Talbot Sweetapple (equal partner with Mackay-Lyons) for the first time several years ago when he had stepped off an early morning flight from Halifax to examine in Glasgow. A shared language was immediately understood which bridged both practice and academia: drawing. Why a concept was unclear, to discover the potential of an underdeveloped detail, and to find a way to unlock a difficult student plan, this was all charted through ‘discussions’ by drawing. A process so direct and implicit in architecture that it goes almost unseen: a language that rarely speaks its name. Open the pages of this book and sketches are never far from view. Set amidst the photographs of the various built projects and the carefully made wooden models, they act as sort of counter ploy between the completeness of the buildings, and to register the openness of design aspirations. The sketches reveal simple strategies for the practice’s buildings, house after house, all unashamedly modern and positioned so as to engage and amplify the beautiful and dramatic coastal landscapes of Eastern Canada.

The severity and extremes of this climate demand that the buildings implicitly understand and provide the need for attendant shelter, but they satisfy so much more than just environmental refuge, with their clear delight in the rituals of the everyday, and the experiential filtering of the world. As a body of work, it is expansive and impressive. There is a clear delight in making, and in the legibility of this making as a craft in itself. The carefully restricted palate of simple materials and the dexterity in the poise and positioning of each building produces dramatic results: cantilevering over a rock edge (Cliff House), bridging across two outcrops (Bridge House), lifting from the ground and pushing out to sea (Two Hulls House), and tentatively far out on a rocky shoreline – so close to the water that the waves wash under it – (Sunset Rock House). These houses enjoy their place in the world: the drama of being and dwelling in it, of the cyclical rhythms of nature, and of ‘walking and listening to the land’ before building in it. They know and understand intuitively the existing structures of the first settlers as a shared lexicon of materials, construction processes, and of a spatial culture. Robert McCarter’s essay takes us on a reflective journey through the work, exploring the cultivation of context in the understanding of critical and regional practices. Louis Kahn is called on as both witness and guide on this journey.

Amidst the houses (this being the majority of their work) comes a series of projects numbered as ‘Ghosts’. Sometimes provocatively flimsy (Ghost 1) – when made with timber and canvas to celebrate the temporal and the ethereal. At other times they are made as look-outs and look-ins, to climb up, or den-like to retreat into. The Shobac Campus (for campus is what it is called) has functioned since 1994 as an architectural education centre. In 2011 it hosted an International conference called ‘Ideas In Things’ which put it on the architectural map.

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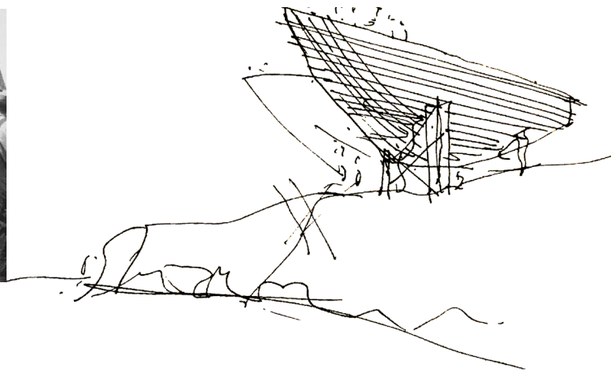


The initiative at Shobac was started by Brian MacKay-Lyons when he became disillusioned with architectural education. Having studied and worked in China, Japan and Italy, with nine students he set up camp above his family's farm, excavating the foundations of an early settler's house (built in 1604 but long abandoned) to build Ghost 1. It was a timber structure covered with translucent tarpaulins, acting to 'Ghost' the footprint of the original house. He was joined on this by colleagues, students, neighbours, and local musicians, as people gathered around the fireplace, which set the first 'Ghost' aglow. There was no way back. Over the years 'Ghost' after 'Ghost' has followed, with explorations into temporary spaces, fabrication methods, landscapes, and materials. It is an extraordinary achievement, started simply by a dissatisfaction with architectural education. While Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin projects are partial models for this, at Shobac it is not the obsessive cult of the messianic architect which is the driver – as it was with Wright – but more an open and generous exploration in different dialogues, with different people: critics, academics, architects, students and the local community.

The house designs of the practice (of which there are many) benefit from the 'Ghostings'. In many cases they give shape to new strategies in a reciprocal dialogue of experimentation and fabrication. Sometimes the similarities are remarkably direct, such as the McLaren House and Ghosts 6, when two towers were constructed to talk to each other. Ghosts 2 and 3 were conceived as land surveying 'instruments' – which in a sense many of the practice's houses appear to be – to play off the topography and to be used to host community events.

Shobac is resonant with traces of the traditional Mi'Kmaq people's settlements, French fishermen's huts, and the inhabitation of the land by waves of settlers migrating westwards from Europe. An interest in rites of passage and ritual, and of history infuse the practice's work, but no more so than what has been achieved at Shobac. While many of the earlier structures have gone (designed to be temporary) it now has a series of permanent structures to house and support the yearly activities. The idea is a simple one: each year a guest architect is invited to join a guest critic to initiate discussions about architecture, and to collectively design and build a structure on the campus. Architects such as Rick Joy have been saddled up with critics such as Kenneth Frampton to work with students, master builders (as the Canadians call them), engineers and volunteers to make new 'Ghosts', usually over a two week period. As one critic has described it, '...it is a built critical-regionalist argument'.

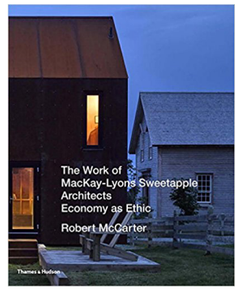
Many of the structures now present, have naturally evolved from this open design curriculum, or have been moved there to be safeguarded. The remarkable Cheboque Schoolhouse from 1830 that MacKay-Lyons had carefully dismantled, transported and rebuilt at Shobac, and the Troop Barn from 1880 that he stopped from being burned, have been rebuilt as community spaces, and figure largely in the unique balance of the collected and invented typologies of the campus. These structures echo with the history of the landscape, and as archetypes to celebrate the collective memory and craft of making them. That they were simple structures brings the new ones into a much richer dialogue and conversation in time.

Pallasma tells us that the task of architecture is to establish our relationship with the world. He re-quotes from Joseph Brodsky's Watermark, 'Beauty can't be targeted...it is always a by-product of other, often very ordinary pursuits.' Here lies the important connection with such academics as Pallasmaa and Frampton, and the unique nature of the practice's work, in supporting a different kind of dialogue between architects and students: that 'thinking' and 'doing' are inseparable, philosophically, in the art of making architecture.

The 'mind the gap' mindset (between academia and practice) is discarded at Shobac in the collaborative energy of each 'Ghosting'. On his own land, beginning with his own position of frustration and dissatisfaction, and by facilitating a forward-looking conversation between architects, academics and students, Brian McKay-Lyons has shown us what is possible.

At the next gathering of the dissenting voices on the relationship between practice and education, I suggest we abandon the diatribes and prejudices, push the elephants out of the room, get up from the table and get outside together to make something. It is time to put some badly needed 'Ghostly' energy back into our slowing, grinding, architectural machine.

Paul Clarke



The Work of MacKay-Lyons Sweetapple Architects: Economy as Ethic

Robert McCarter

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